The Diary: Tom Hiddleston

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FULL TEXT

"This is the shot where you see Kong for the first time." First day, first shot, a new gig: I'm in at the deep end. I've started principal photography on a new King Kong film -- Skull Island/ -- which is under way on the island of Oahu, Hawaii.

As an actor with a passion for the history of cinema, this is a red-letter day for me. I have stared into the eyes of the ape. A tower of power and majesty, standing like a king.

In actual fact, the lens of a camera locked on to a frame of my eyes, focused intently and intensely into a deep, dizzying, almost hallucinogenic expanse of green screen, with only my imagination as fuel to the fire. But that's what I love about acting. It is, and will forever be, a childlike act of imagining. Sixteen months from now that single shot will sit side-by-side with a shot of an icon of the cinema, from the days when film as an art form was still in its infancy. King Kong is back.

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The film business is the modern-day circus -- in every respect. A different troupe swings into town every weekend, each with its own promise of an exclusive new show under the Big Top, all competing for two hours' traffic of your time. James Bond! A haunted house! A man on Mars!

Mercifully, dancing bears no longer feature on the bill, but actors now have new responsibilities, separate from their time "out front", on the stage or in front of a green screen.

They are required to embark on tours of promotional duty to represent the work of hundreds and thousands of people in front of and behind the camera -- the real magicians, costume designers, production designers, props masters, set decorators -- who make the show the spectacle that it is. For most actors, this is the real work.

Over the past two months, I have done a great deal less imagining and significantly more talking. During these press tours -- a contractual requirement upon actors in the modern age to help spread the word and to drive box office -- one hopes, above all else, to represent the director's intentions, to introduce the film, to deepen the audience's understanding of the context in which the film was made, not to take oneself too seriously, and to emerge with one's personal dignity relatively intact. Not everybody plays fair. I have learned a whole new set of skills in dodging headline-chasing hot potatoes: those questions designed to elicit a sensationalist answer more likely to drive traffic to a given website.

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Film is evolving at a rate we can't track. We're already living in cinema's future. When Michael J Fox's Marty McFly flashes forward 30 years in Back to the Future II/, a film released in 1989, he arrives on October 21, 2015. Flat screens are everywhere, as predicted. Hover-boards? Not exactly. But that film, which once looked into the future, will now always be set in our past.

Time has been on my mind lately. High-Rise/, adapted by British director Ben Wheatley from the novel of the same name by JG Ballard, held its British premiere at the BFI London Film Festival in October. Written in 1975, High-Rise/ is a satire on social mores, a dystopian nightmare in which the inhabitants of a state of the art tower block -- I play a young doctor moving in for the first time -- succumb to their basest instincts, which lurk beneath a thin veneer of civilised manners. The high-rise is like an ocean liner disappearing over the horizon, where everybody on deck lives according to his or her own law. The film is set in the mid-1970s but the satire bites in the present day.

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Ben and I decided to surprise the audience of the second screening with a Q&A session, which took place at the Odeon Leicester Square at 11 o'clock on a Sunday morning -- either too early, or not early enough, for Ballard's bacchanalian dystopia, depending on your predilections.

Ballard wrote the book in the past, looking into the future; and we had made a film from the future, looking back into the past.

Ballard himself was prophetic about so many things: our ever-increasing dependence on technology and the industrialisation of the moving image, and how those two things would change the way we think and have an impact on our collective psychology that is lasting and profound. "One will have", Ballard predicted, "access to vast amounts of filmed information of every conceivable kind. One will be able to sort of merge one's own identity with a huge flux of images of various kinds being generated everywhere else". YouTube, Instagram, "selfies": Ballard saw it coming.

I had been reading a volume of Ballard's interviews, Extreme Metaphors/, and decided on a whim to tuck the book under my arm and read a passage aloud at the Q&A. After a short preface, I stared out at an audience armed with smartphones -- hundreds of blinking, bright, white lights facing towards me, one of them belonging to Ben Wheatley himself -- each creating their own, subjective, digital narrative.

I read aloud the following passage, dating from 1978: "In exactly the same way as, when you first get a camera, you spend your time photographing children playing in a paddling pool. But after a while, you get more ambitious, and you start taking an interest in the world at large. I think the same thing will happen -- beginning with endlessly photographing themselves, shaving, having dinner together, having domestic rows -- of course the bedroom applications are obvious." Afterwards, as Ben and I emerge on to Charing Cross Road, we are greeted by a line of well-wishers, each asking for a selfie of their own.

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The London Film Festival is made possible by the British Film Institute, which recently launched "Film Is Fragile", a new campaign to raise funds to help preserve the nation's film collection. Established with great foresight in 1933, incidentally, the very same year in which Merian C Cooper and Ernest B Schoedsack released the first, now classic, King Kong/ picture for RKO, the BFI was smartly conceived by those working in the early days of film, who understood that it would become a powerful art form of the modern era.

The BFI National Archive was intended as a collection of equal stature to such other great British collections as the National Gallery and British Library. But the BFI National Archive currently receives Pounds 6m a year; the British Library almost Pounds 100m. We must do all we can -- I am now acting in my new capacity as ambassador to the BFI -- to help them out.

We can't predict the future (well, Ballard can, and Michael J Fox and Christopher Lloyd got very close), but we are bound inexorably to our past. And, if we don't preserve our film collection at the BFI -- an urgent obligation of the present -- then the treasures of the past, of film, of the defining art form of our age, will disappear, like all those selfies, into the cloud.

Tom Hiddleston is an actor and the first BFI ambassador/

Illustration by Luke Waller/

Credit: Tom Hiddleston

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